Debate

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Islamism and Nationalism

Islamism and nationalism are conventionally thought of as antithetical ideologies, yet there is in fact often a nationalistic dimension to Islamism. One is reminded of the relationship between Marxism and nationalism. In principle, Marxists condemn nationalism, as do Islamists. Yet the revolutions waged in the name of Marxist ideology since World War II were all fuelled by nationalistic resentment of foreign domination. Such resentment, among other things, also fuelled the principal Islamist movements of the late 20th century. In both cases, an ostensibly universalistic ideology has actually often had a more parochial nationalistic character in practice.

Religious and national identity tend to be fused in many parts of the world. One thinks, for example, of the linkage between Eastern Orthodoxy and Russian and Serbian national identity, between Roman Catholicism and Croatian, Irish, and Polish national identity, and between Hinduism and Indian national identity. To be a Serb is to be Orthodox, to be a Croatian is to be Catholic, and, from the point of view of Hindu nationalists at least, to be an Indian is to be Hindu. In all these cases, religion serves as a badge of national identity. This has also been true in the Islamic world.

Arab nationalism in the 20th century usually had an implicitly Sunni Islamic hue to it. To be sure, Christians played a prominent role in creating the concept of Arab nationalism, based upon common language and culture rather than religion (a point invariably stressed by Islamist critics of nationalism). But the fact remains that in the popular imagination all over the Arabic-speaking world, to be an Arab is to be a Muslim – a Sunni Muslim. Similarly, to be an Iranian, a 'real' one, is to be a Shiᶜite.

When the European empires subjugated the Islamic world in the 19th and early 20th centuries, anti-imperialist resistance was articulated in Islamic terms. Most Muslims thought of their wars against European imperialism as forms of jihad. The distinction between Muslim and infidel became intertwined with the distinction between the colonized and the colonizer, the oppressed and the oppressor. Thus, traditional hostility toward the unbeliever qua unbeliever was now infused with new meaning. This had unfortunate consequences for religious minorities in the Islamic world. Christians were suspected of sympathizing with Christian Europe. Jews were suspected of sympathizing with Zionism and, after 1948, with Israel.

Secular nationalism did of course play an important role in the Middle East in the middle of the 20th century. One thinks, for example, of Mossadegh and the National Front in Iran, Nasser and 'Nasserism' in Egypt, and the emergence of the PLO among the Palestinians. But all these forms of nationalism eventually failed to produce liberation from foreign domination, not to mention the various other social and economic problems found in most of the 'Third World'. Moreover, all these forms of 'secular' nationalism were in fact imbued by Islam at the grassroots level. At the height of their power in the early 1950s, Mossadegh and the National Front depended on the support of the Ayatollah Khashani and the *mullah*s. Nasser may have opposed the Muslim Brotherhood's goal of a strictly Islamic state, but his public persona was that of a Muslim fighting to free Muslims from Western imperialism. Had his first name been Butros, Nasser would never have become Nasser. As for the Palestine Liberation Organization, its core group was al-Fatah, which always made extensive use of traditional Islamic concepts such as jihad and *shahid*, 'martyr'. The more secular Marxist Palestinian movements led by the Christians George Habbash and Nayif Hawatmeh never had anything like the popular appeal of al-Fatah.

Nationalistic resentment of foreign domination – the Iranian case

Islamists tend to lament the Western domination of the Islamic world as a whole and portray the emergence of nationalism as part of a Western and Jewish conspiracy to divide and conquer the Islamic world. Yet the rhetoric of these fiery critics of nationalism often has a decidedly nationalistic ring to it.

In 1964, the Ayatollah Khomeini gave a speech in which he criticized the Iranian parliament, or Majlis, for passing a bill granting diplomatic immunity to American military and civilian personnel:

> *'Do you not know that this agreement reduces the Iranian people to a level lower than that of an American dog?*
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> *If someone [an Iranian, that is] runs over an American dog with his car, he is subject to investigation and prosecution even if he is 'the shah' himself. But if an American cook runs over 'the shah of Iran' himself, or any other important person, he will not be subject to prosecution.'*

This statement articulates resentment of foreign domination in an earthy, populist idiom that both an illiterate labourer and a well-educated secular nationalist could understand. Khomeini's reference to 'the Iranian people' is quite striking given his condemnation of nationalism in his later writings.

It must be recognized, however, that Khomeini often spoke of the Western domination of the Islamic world in general, not just Iran. In 1972, he declared:

> *'If the Muslim states and peoples had relied on Islam and its inherent capabilities and powers instead of depending on the East (the Soviet Union) and the West, and if they had placed the enlightened and liberating precepts of the Quran before their eyes and put them into practice, then they would not today be captive slaves of the Zionist aggressors, terrified victims of the American Phantoms, and toys in the hands of the accommodating policies of the satanic Soviet Union. It is the disregard of the noble Quran by the Islamic countries that has brought the Islamic community to this difficult situation full of misfortunes and reversals and placed its fate in the hands of the imperialism of the left and the right.'*

Passages like this are commonplace in Islamist literature, though we do find some variation in this respect from country to country and group to group. In many cases, the resentment of foreign domination articulated in such passages is expressed in terms of preposterous theories that attempt to blame 'crusader' and Jewish conspiracies for all the problems of the Islamic world. As illusory as these explanations may be, the resentment they reflect is real. And it is a major source of the appeal of Islamism.

For Khomeini and many Islamists like him, the idea of a 'return to Islam' and the establishment of a strictly Islamic state and society are linked to the goal of overcoming foreign domination. The underlying logic of the Islamist argument is familiar: The believers are suffering because they have deviated from the laws of God. To end their suffering, they have to conform to God's laws. God has allowed the infidels to dominate the believers because they have deviated from His laws. Once they conform, He will grant them victory. Such reasoning is often meshed with more subtle themes, notably that of cultural authenticity. The return to Islam becomes a means of regaining one's true cultural identity – as opposed to mimicry of the dominant West.

Nationalistic resentment of foreign domination – the case of Hamas

We have already noted the Islamic rhetoric employed by al-Fatah, the principal group in the PLO. Equally striking is the nationalist rhetoric of Hamas, the principal Islamist opposition to the PLO. We find the following passage in a flyer distributed by Hamas in January 1988, at the beginning of the Intifada:

> *'What has happened? The awakening of a people. The Muslim people avenges its honour and renews the glories of the past, this people that refuses to give up the smallest piece of its homeland [shibr min watanihi], that rejects Camp David, that rejects the international conference and humiliating peace, that rejects imprisonment and banishment, that rejects capitulation of all kinds.'*

The phrase 'Muslim people' in this passage clearly refers primarily to the Palestinian people. And the passage focuses primarily on the liberation of Palestine. Hamas leaders and supporters do of course condemn the PLO for its failure to fight for an Islamic state, but they also frequently condemn it for having capitulated to Israel by signing the Oslo Accords.

The Oslo Accords of 1993, and the various agreements that followed them, created a plethora of little urban islands ruled by the Palestinian National Authority. To go from one such island to another entails humiliating interrogations and searches at Israeli checkpoints. When Israeli soldiers prevented him from travelling from Gaza to his home on the West Bank, Ahmad Qureiᶜ (Abu al-Ala), one of the principal negotiators of the Oslo Accords and president of the Palestinian parliament, declared: 'Soon, I too will join Hamas.' Qureiᶜ did not really mean this. But his words reflected the fury of a man outraged by the subjugation of his people. Such fury fuels Hamas.

Conclusion

It would be absurd to argue that nationalistic resentment of foreign domination is the sole source of the appeal of Islamism. An adequate explanation of Islamism must also take into consideration the dire economic situation in much of the Islamic world. One must also recognize that many of the secular grievances that fuel Islamist movements also exist elsewhere in the Third World without resulting in the creation of militant religious revivalism. There are specific aspects of Islamic doctrine that encourage the emergence of such movements. Once must also recognize that Islamism is at least partially fuelled by moral outrage provoked by the violation of traditional religious values. The outrage provoked by Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* cannot simply be attributed to resentment of Western domination or economic discontent. But while all these points are important, the fact remains that the Iranian revolution of 1978-79 was, among other things, a nationalist revolution. And Hamas is, among other things, a nationalist movement. ✦

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